

Cultivating Parental Involvement in Middle Schools:
A Case Study

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Abstract

Much evidence has suggested that parents and educators often have very different perceptions about the reasons for low student performance, the appropriate role for parents in the school, and the role of the principal (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000). Conflicting opinions about the parent role in the school often creates misunderstanding and frustration. With the goal of increased student achievement in mind, the context of Joyce Epstein's (1995) six Typologies of Parental Involvement is the theoretical framework on which the inquiry is based. The investigation of the perceptions of parents and educators occurred at multiple middle school sites. Middle school was the focus of this inquiry because, not only are middle school students in transition physically, the emotional transition can be felt also on the parent or guardian, and can influence parental involvement and engagement. The qualitative case study inquiry examined (1) socio-economic conditions and parental activities (2) Parental thoughts and student achievements (3) teachers' perceptions of

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socio-economic factors of parent (4) school administrators' perceptions of socio-economic factors of the parent. Findings indicate various discrepancies in perceptions.

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1

THE ISSUE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLS

The issue of parental involvement in schools is increasingly important to the school setting .Most schools and educators recognize parental and family involvement as an important factor in a child's success in school. Many school districts cite the lack of parental involvement as the second largest obstacle to school improvement behind lack of funding (Gonzalez, 2002). Researchers argue that most economically

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disadvantaged parents are willing to be involved in their children's education but lack the knowledge and resources to be properly engaged. The process of utilizing outside resources to further children's development is often limited by the resources of some parents.

Researchers Chin and Phillips in 2004 conducted a qualitative study of the academic activities of 90 middle grade students from the same school in Southern California representing varied racial and socioeconomic backgrounds and found that although the parents aspirations for their children were similar, the parents were constrained by limited finances, human, cultural, and social capital when arranging enriching academic environments and activities for their children. Although more resources are available through technology, grants, local venues and education, parental involvement in schools persist to a fault. Current research suggests that the closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on a child's development and educational achievement.

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Furthermore, parental involvement has a positive impact on student achievement. Children whose parents help them at home and stay in touch with schools score higher than children of similar aptitude and family background whose parents are not involved. Parents continue to be the vital source to a child's education. The key to successful parental and family involvement programs is acknowledging all parents have hopes and goals for their children and encouraging them to use their voice in the partnership.

DEFINING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Joyce Epstein a leading researcher on parental and family involvement establishes that different strategies to involve families are required as students advance through the grades. Others agree that parents want to be involved in order to help children achieve, but need guidance and assistance. Given training and encouragement, parents will be able to model best practices for academic achievement. Further studies found that parents of all ethnic backgrounds, education, and income levels often have

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positive influences on their children's learning as well as varying perceptions on how to be involved in their children's education. The most likely factors to influence a student's education are parental involvement, economics, culture, and the quality of their schooling.

Relationships between low-income minority families and the schools are extremely complex, specifically for families with students who are falling behind academically. Increased parental involvement has been associated with improvements in the attitude of parents, teachers, administrators and students toward school and learning. Joyce Epstein concludes clearly that the evidence is visible for parental involvement that perceptions, activities, and interests at home, participation in schools, and classrooms affect children's achievement, attitudes and inspirations, even after student ability and family socio-economic status are taken into account. Students gain in personal and academic development if their families emphasize schooling, let the children know they do, and do so continually over the school year.

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The need for continuity between home and school increase during the middle school years, parents tend to become less confident that they can help their children at home, and also during this time children begin to separate themselves from the home and the family. Parental involvement during the primary years is essential but the momentum and resources must continue to ensure successful completion of education throughout the middle school years. Poverty has had a profound negative impact on children's educational success. Approximately 22.1% of children from low income families' drop out of school compared to 2.6% of children from high income families (DeHann and McDermid 1998). Historical information on the influences of parental involvement suggest that even though poverty affects school performance to some degree, an environment that is rich in language and stimulating to children withstand socioeconomic conditions .

Researchers further argue that it is relatively unimportant how parents participate in their children's education as long as

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they contribute in some ways. Although evidence indicates that not all types of parental involvement are equally effective, it is generally accepted that all stakeholders, parents, educators and students, benefit when parents are appropriately involved in their children's education. Belenardo (2001) and Sheridan(2003) talk about parental activities within the school setting taking on a variety of forms to match the needs, goals, and interests of educators, parents, and community and how the interdependence of individual members operate like a domino effect, one movement affects the other. While parental involvement has oscillated over the past centuries, its significance has currently become a national agenda resulting in a considerable augment in the attention given to home and school partnership.

WHY WE VALUE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement originated through Public Law 94-142. Public Law 94-142 also known as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) emphasizes the importance of family involvement for children with disabilities (McDonald, Martin &

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Wheaton, 1996), the concept also gained attention with the origination of Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary School Act (Ramirez, 2001), and in (2001) the passage of the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) which further proposed to develop a parental involvement policy with input and agreement of parents (Flannery, 2004). Under this current legislation, school districts nationwide are encouraged to reexamine their parental involvement policies and programs, to demonstrate innovative initiatives in order to obtain federal funding.

The NCLB strongly supports expanded opportunities for decision making and other alternatives associated with parental involvement. One major expansion under NCLB is interpreted as the home being a disciplinary model and resource site (Christie, 2005). Transformation in education can occur when the expanded opportunities are clear, precise, and include parents in the joint decision making process. To bring about this change, stakeholders must be involved in development and implementa-

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tion of the entire process with understanding and sensitivity to the perceptions of all vested parties, accepting that parental involvement is an investment in student academic achievement from elementary through secondary levels (Golarz & Golarz, 1995).

There is significant evidence that the degrees to which parents are involved diminishes as the students move into the middle and high school years (Burke, 1999; Lucas & Lusthaus, 1978). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2000) reports that 90% of fourth graders were in schools that reported more than half the parents participated in parent- teacher conferences. That population was only 57% among eighth graders (NAEP). In a survey conducted in (2001) one fourth of students surveyed felt their parents showed little or no interest in what they studied at school (Morse, 2001). Bowen (2003) confers that parental involvement in middle schools has been less frequent than in elementary schools.

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Since parents are generally not aware of middle level practices, educators should play a bigger role in educating parents and the community about the qualities and expectations of a high-performing middle level school, at the same time understanding the perceptions of its stakeholders across social and economic lines (Mulhall, Mertens, & Flowers, 2001). Lack of available resources such as time, money, and other resources play important roles. Major differences in children's achievement are attributable to parental resources, perceptions of schools, not just financial but variations in culture are actually socioeconomic issues (Fitzgerald, 2006).

Khan (2004) concludes that as academic performance continues to decline in the middle school years; many educators and policymakers look at parental involvement as one of the decisive factors to improve academic performance for all students. Another essential concern of policymakers is whether socioeconomic groups share the same perceptions of schooling and involvement as the issue relates to student achievement. Cur-

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rently, the issue of equity in education persists and is debated intensely in the United States (Freeman, 1997). Much evidence implies that parents and educators share very different perceptions of parental involvement, student performance, and roles of the principal at middle schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000). Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) indicate that the perceptions of parental involvement across social and economic borders at the middle school level have not been clearly understood by stakeholders, resulting in low parental involvement and ultimately low student academic achievement.

IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Research over the past 20 years has shown that when a child's parent is involved with education there are positive results in self-esteem, behavior and attendance. Yet, at the middle grade level, parental involvement begins to decline. Research further shows that cultural and economics play significant roles in the outcome of parental involvement in a student's education. Some parents may not understand the language, and the cultural

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expectations of parents may be different than those used in school (Swap, 1990; Lewis & Henderson, 1997). Furthermore, disadvantaged parents and teachers may be entwined by various psychological barriers to mutual involvement such as misperception, negative expectations, stereotypes, and distrusts (Moles & D'Angelo, 1993). These perspectives may lead some educators to reflect negatively on students and parental involvement, imposing major barriers to developing positive home and school connections.

The central principle of parental involvement is that when parents are involved in their children's education students excel at a greater rate academically. Chavkin (1993) proposes that most parents regardless of socioeconomic positions are quite willing to be involved in the education of their children, but some lack the knowledge of ways to be involved at home or at school. Joyce Epstein's (1995) six Typology of parental involvement is the framework on which this book was based.

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Six Typology

Type 1: Parenting is the development of practices that facilitates families establishing home environments to support children as students.

Type 2: Communicating is the design of effective forms of communication by schools that promote effective school to home and home to school communication about school programs and children progress.

Type 3: Volunteering is parent becoming involved by volunteering at school and serving as an audience for school performances.

Type 4: Learning at home is parents helping students at home with homework and other curriculum related activities.

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- Type 5: Decision making is parents becoming involved in school decisions and developing as parent leaders and representatives by participating on boards and committees.
- Type 6: Collaboration with community is community resources and agencies becoming integrated with school programs and fostering a shared responsibility for children (Epstein, 1995, p.704).

Together with other discussions examined in the chapters of this book, support how perceptions of stakeholders regarding parental involvement impact a student's academic achievements particularly at the middle grade level.

MAKING THE CASE

The case study for this book utilized an in-depth multiple site qualitative methodology with quantitative descriptive statistical analysis to understand the perceptions of parents and educators relating to parental involvement at Public Middle

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Schools. Data collections occurred between March 2007 and May 2007. The participants were middle school teachers, parents and principals. The parent sample represented high and low socioeconomic groups. Having used Epstein's (1995) Typology of parental involvement, this book determined whether there are differences in perceptions of parents and educators relating to parental involvement at Middle Schools.

OVERVIEW OF THE REMAINING CHAPTERS

The remainder of the book is organized in the following format. Chapter two provides reviewed literature and summarizes some relevant studies and knowledge about parental involvement, the perceptions of stakeholders at the middle school levels using Epstein's (1995) six Types of parental involvement. Chapter three describes the methods and procedures used in investigating the perceptions of parental involvement between different socioeconomic groups. Specifically, the chapter provides a description of the design of the case study. In Chapter 4, the data is presented through emergent themes that

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address the research questions. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, and recommendations for further research.

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CRITICAL CONSIDERATION FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

This chapter reviews literature and summarizes some relevant studies and knowledge about parental involvement, the perceptions of stakeholders and its impact on student academic achievements at the middle school levels utilizing Epstein's (1995) six Types of parental involvement. The first part provides an overview of parental involvement. The second section includes information on transitions and perceptions of the middle school student, and the third investigates seven significant elements that shape perceptions among stakeholders.

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Societal changes brought about evolution in patterns of parental involvement. For example, in the early 19th century, the actions of schools were controlled in large part by the church and community. Prentice and Houston (1975) reasoned that the community consisted of home, school, and church which supported the same goals for learning and integrating students into the adult community. In the early 1900's, school attendance became obligatory, and schools began to assume the compulsory aspects of parental involvement as it is presently. Renewed interests in parental involvement evolved from Kirshbaum (1998) study in support of the values of parent as partners in education. The phenomenon of parental involvement in student academic performance is vital. As a result, it is often called an "institutionalized standard" (Laureau, 1989; Wheeler, 1992).

Educators, politicians, and reformers have made parental involvement a national agenda that many parents, wealthy or not, are left to feel remorseful about not participating more (Cut-

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ler, 2000). Additionally, Phillips (1998) found that parental education and social economic status have an impact on student achievement. Furthermore, students with parents who were both college educated tend to achieve at the highest levels. These parents were likely to think positively about involvement in school and student activities.

Many educational researchers have shown that perceptions of parental involvement drive student levels of motivation, enthusiasm and achievement in academics. Building on the 1960 federal legislation regarding parental involvement, Ramirez (2000) argued that the movement continued with the passage of the (2001) No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). With this enactment, it has become the responsibility of school districts to vigilantly pursue and use all available resources to entice parental involvement. The importance of parental involvement as accentuated by the (2001) NCLB holds our nation's schools accountable for academic achievement for all students. Parents, teachers, and principals' preparation institutions need to know

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this law, its accountability provisions, and its benchmarks which set achievement standards including parental involvement for all students (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005).

TRANSITION PERCEPTIONS

In many cases, students are ambivalent regarding the degree to which their parents should be actively engaged in their schooling. A multitude of factors affects their feelings, not the least of which is the student's age. At any age, however, the relationship between a parent and a child is key, in most endeavors, clear and frequent communication is crucial to successful relationships (Boyd, 2005).

Christie (2001) characteristics of a typical middle school student include flashes of anger, performance of belligerence and frequent unreliability with a bout of compassion, and keen intelligence and maturity. The National Committee for Citizens in Education (1991) further summarized numerous common characteristics of the middle school student that includes:

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- (a) High levels of emotional and physical energy, which may contrast with periods of laziness;
- (b) The thrill of adventure, risk and danger, conversely, their feelings are extremely delicate;
- (c) Demanding independence from parents, yet needing to be pampered and protected;
- (d) Withdrawn from parents, but crave acceptance from peers and;
- (e) Wanting privileges, but avoiding responsibilities.

(NCCE, 1991).

Waggoner (1994) study of 171 sixth grade students have found that transition from elementary school to middle school tend to be frustrated for the typical middle school student. To alleviate some transition anxiety, Waggoner recognized that students from teamed setting elementary schools with high levels of parental involvement demonstrated a stronger affiliation in school activities and fewer concerns about the transition to middle schools.

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Analyzing data of active participating and nonparticipating parents in middle school student's educational process, several researchers have concluded that parental beliefs are important foundations to parental involvement. Eccles and Howard (1993) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) have established that when parents believe that they can affect their children's education, share perceptions on child development, believe that the school desires their help, and feel comfortable with the school; these are significant milestones in the parental involvement process. Comparative studies by researchers such as Coleman, Collinge, and Seifert (1993) suggested that the perceptions of students regarding their schooling were often independent of their parents' perceptions. According to the researchers, evidence pointed to a "disconnect" between students and their parents regarding their perceptions of schools, classrooms, and teachers that affected their overall rating of the school. Yet, the same study suggested that for students, the most important element is the student's perception of communication

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with his or her parents about the school. The student's perception of student-teacher collaboration is critically important, since it strongly connects with parent attitudes. (p. 63).

Chavkin (1993) concurred that most parents are quite willing to be involved in their children's educational activities, but lack the knowledge of ways to be involved at home or at school, especially low-income minority parents. Researchers studying perceptions maintained that parents are more likely to be engaged in activities that they believe they can be successful at. Bandura (1977) termed this concept self-efficiency. Ramey and Ramey (1994) agreed that many low socioeconomic parents are faced with other major challenges when providing optimal care and education for their children. Basic necessities such as housing, food, clothing, and health care often takes priority over educational toys, games, and books. For self-sufficiency to evolve under these conditions and be transformed into adequate parental involvement, disadvantaged parents need assistance in finding the extra resources necessary for skill building and

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knowledge on how to help their children succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1985).

Epstein and Dauber (1991) explained that perceptions of socioeconomic status (SES) may influence parental involvement in student academic achievement. Advocates of middle school education contended that young adolescents are more successful at schools that are developmentally appropriate, socially equitable, and academically excellent (National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2002). Therefore, a strong and positive perception of parental activities at this level is likely to impact optimistically on a student academic achievement. The implications of the research conducted by Coleman et al. focused on two important themes. First, changes in teachers' practices that improved the level of teacher/student communication had positive effects.

Students benefit when they have the perception of collaborating with the teacher in a learning partnership. It was desirable for teachers to change their practices in such a way as

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to strengthen the parent-student communication. According to Zellman and Waterman (1998), “Although enthusiasm is not a tangible contribution, research shows that parent-child interaction is more important than the extent of parent involvement at school. Programs should incorporate both on-school-site and at-home interaction” (p. 370).

The positive effects of parental involvement are not limited to students' achievement. Research conducted by Epstein (1985) indicated that as a result of increased parental involvement in learning activities at home, students reported having more positive attitudes towards school, more regular homework habits, more similarity between the school and their family, more familiarity between the teacher and their parents, and more homework on weekends.

Seven significant elements that form perceptions among educational groups of stakeholders leading to student academic achievement are: overcoming suspicions of school and trusting school personnel, beyond tradition, collaborative decision mak-

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ing, the need for continuous partnership, community development, involvement in a variety of ways, and volunteering.

SUSPICION AND TRUST ISSUE IN PARTNERSHIP

Critical to parental involvement and harmonious to school and parent relations is the matter of trust. In authoritative relationships, lower socioeconomic societal groups have experienced the following patterns of interaction in relation to the dominant groups:

- (1) the intrinsic value of the group denied,
- (2) Objective evidence is accumulated to demonstrate the groups inferiority,
- (3) Inferior status is used to exclude the group from activities and occupations that entails societal rewards (Jenkins, 2004).

Cummins (1986) argued that when these types of behaviors describe educator/parent or educator/student relationships, the results is parents and students who are immobilized are disallowed from recognizing any forms of success in the system.

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Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, and Downburst (1993) offered reasons for lack of parental involvement. These include: negative past in schools, lack of trust, and lack of appropriate communication skills. Anderson (1988) postulated that teachers often equate parent nonparticipation with parent not caring about their child's education. Epstein and Dauber (1989) argued that teachers in the elementary school levels are more active in involving parents than at the middle school level. One reason is, each teacher at the elementary grade level works with a single group or class of students, so, the teacher becomes the single contact person from the school as the go to person. Comparatively, at the middle school level, students generally have many teachers and vice versa, making it extremely difficult for relationships to develop between teachers and parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1989).

Epstein and Dauber noted that:

- (1) Middle school teachers use less specific school to home communication practices;

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- (2) Middle school teachers communicate less often than elementary teachers with families;
- (3) Middle school parents receive less information on guidance at the very time they need more information and more guidance in how to be involved in larger and more complex class schedules and subjects.

As a result, some middle schools have adopted a smaller, more personal learning environment similar to that of elementary schools (Epstein, 1992b). Our 21st century society have demanded that parents, teachers, and administrators appeal to a personal learning community, broadening the notion of parental involvement due to the effects of unresolved negative experiences of parents perceptions of school issues (Bogan, 2004).

Parental involvement increases when the administration and staff of a school communicate a genuine desire to involve parents by considering their needs (Collins, Cooper, & Whitmore, 1995). Pepperl and Lezotte (2001) proposed that the

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benefits of engaging parents in the educational activities of their children yield strong positive effects regardless of a parent's socioeconomic background. Although parental involvement has fluctuated over the past two centuries, its importance has now become a national agenda resulting in a significant increase in the attention given to home/school partnerships (Belenardo, 2001). Because parental involvement has been demonstrated to have such significant effects upon students' performance, the factors that influence it have become a matter of great interest to educational decision-makers (Feurstein, 2000). Although the factors may not be easily influenced, bridges can be and are being built over these barriers. It has become clear that "great schools have strong partnerships with parents" (Million, 2003, p. 5).

Epstein (1995) Type Two parental involvement strategy communication; gleaned this concept where the idea to design a more effective and useful form of school to home and home to school communication for families about school programs and

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children's progress, and Typology Three; volunteering by recruiting and organizing parents help and support offered credence in this aspect. When parents know what to expect and are visible in the schools and classrooms, trusting relationships develop (Carter, 2002). This makes it imperative for educators to deal with individuals as a whole, setting the essential groundwork for understanding perceptions by studying personal variables such as motivation, academic, self concept, and attitudes of both students and parents (Alomar, 2006).

Pogoloff (1997) recommended that educators who develop a personal relationship with parents are likely to see an increase in communication and volunteers in their schools; a reported benefit of trust. Parents who are active participants in education have reported the feeling of comfort in sharing crucial and relevant information about their child and family. They have a certain level of trust with teachers and administration (Epstein, 1996). Comer (1988) consented to the link between school/home communication, volunteering, and student achievement. Parents

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who perceived that they can trust school officials have described fewer conflicts than parents lacking trust (Epstein, 1992a).

Surveys collected from parents of students in several middle schools (Mulhall, Merten and Flowers, 2001) provided data of middle level professionals sharing insights of patterns and relationships between parent familiarities with middle level practices and parent engagement. The data showed that parents in these schools were generally not aware of the established middle level practices; in addition disadvantaged families generally expressed a greater lack of awareness about these practices (Mulhall, Merten & Flowers, 2001).

Educators have facilitated parental trust through school and home communications enabling parents to feel included in the decisions and actions affecting their children, cementing the links between education and community involvement. (Desimone, 1999). Cultural diversity has also affected parental involvement and trust vastly. Moreover, research has shown that the social context in which some parents live predicts parental

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involvement. Specifically, cultural and language barriers impact communication. Parents may not understand the language on written communications sent to them. Additionally, cultural difference of immigrant families may be different than those promoted by the school (Lewis & Henderson, 1997; Swap, 1990).

Furthermore, disadvantaged parents and teachers are likely to be caught up in various psychological obstacles to mutual involvement such as misperceptions and misunderstandings, negative expectations, stereotypes, intimidations, and distrusts (Moles & D'Angelo, 1993). These factors may lead some educators to view students negatively imposing major barriers to developing authentic home and school connections (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997). Parents who fit this criterion are normally referred to as "hard to reach parent" (Clark-White & Decker, 2001). In fact, many suburban teachers also enter the schools with negative preconceived perceptions of minority families (King, 1991; Howard, 2003), which impedes parental involve-

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ment tremendously. Cummins (1986) indicated that parents can be empowered rather than be disabled through school.

When educators involve lower socioeconomic groups of parents as partners in their children's education, parents develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to children with positive results (Jenkins, 2004).

BEYOND TRADITIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Becher conducted an extensive review of research in (1984) relating to the involvement of parents in their children's learning. Looking at nearly 200 studies which focused on the following issues:

- (a) How the role of the family influences the child's intelligence, competence, and achievement;
- (b) How parent education programs affect student achievement;
- (c) How parent practices influence reading readiness; and
- (d) The effects of parental involvement in education.

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Becher's results implied that students with high academic achievement have parents with high expectations for them. Also, these students had the benefits of frequent interaction with their parents; parents in turn were apt to see themselves as “teachers” of their children as they modeled and reinforced learning.

Several other studies have provided insights into different contexts of contemporary parental involvement; (Carter, 2002; Epstein, 1992a, 1995; Epstein & Conner, 1995; Field-Smith, 2005; Kettler and Valentine, 2000) found successful parental involvement requires knowledge of the benefits of involvement in school affairs. Most of the research that examined parental roles and perceptions of involvement have concluded that the more parents believe that all parents are involved in their children’s education, the more they are likely to be involved themselves (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997). In short, parents need to know, understand and practice the importance and the benefits of involvement in education.

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Most schools are redefining the traditional events of parental involvement and adapting to parents specific needs. Some middle schools now offer activities that parents can both participate in at home and support at school. For example, creating reading groups for parent and child or helping the child with homework projects that are community oriented and experimental (Clark, 1995). Epstein's Type 6 parental involvement strategy lends itself to this aspect. Collaborating with community by identifying and integrating resources and services to strengthen school programs, parent practices, student learning, and development are overarching themes in this context. Although there is no guarantee that every social association within the community are appropriate resources for learning, assets to increase parental involvement at home and at school must be explored and implemented accordingly within the community to reinforce parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Jones, 1997).

Rudolph (2000) credited going beyond the traditions of the quarterly parent teacher conferences, and the occasional tele-

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phone contacts in cases where a student's behavior is not adequate as steps in the right direction toward partnership with parents. The national trend in the parental involvement movement is increasingly shifting parental and community involvement strategies from the traditional approach, focusing on honing low income parents power and political skills to hold schools accountable for results (Baker, 2000). Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) indicated that parental involvement must sometimes be urged, coaxed, supported by incentives, legislated, and mandated because of barriers that negatively affected the engagement of each stakeholder.

Unfortunately, the methods that are put forward to motivate parents to become engaged in a child's education have not been clearly understood (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). Conversely, much evidence has suggested that parents and educators often have very different perceptions about the reasons for low student performance, the appropriate role for parents in the school, and the role of the principal (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000). Conflicting

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opinions about the parent role in the school often creates misunderstanding. Stallworth (1982) found that while both teachers and principals encourage parental involvement in helping children with schoolwork and in supporting school activities, neither favor parental involvement in curricular, instructional, or school governance domains.

In short, the perceptions of teachers and principals of middle schools is often parental *support* rather than parental *involvement* (Boyd, 2005). The Carnegie Council(1989) suggested that middle schools engage parents by presenting them meaningful roles in school decision making, communicating with parents about school programs, student progress, and make continuous effort to support the learning process at school and at home while clearly defining parental support versus involvement . Furthermore, at times educators create barriers to parent involvement. Such counterproductive performances include contacting the parent only in crisis situations, labeling family structures (e.g.” single-parent”), and judging the family as “defi-

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cient” (Christenson, 2004). Educators who would seek to help remove barriers to parent involvement were challenged by Christenson who stated:

We fail as educators when we form conclusions based on what we believe families need. This is heightened when we do not consider how families may be supporting their children’s education already. In fact, parents who experience diverse ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and educational backgrounds are involved in the lives of their children, regardless of whether they are formally involved in their school life. Furthermore, many families are involved in the education of their children, albeit in ways that school personnel may not consider because they see no concrete product. As a result, there is too little outreach to families and children about whom school personnel are most concerned; if educators portray families as “dysfunctional,” then how can a partnership for children’s learning occur? (p. 9)

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SHARED DECISION MAKING

Shared decisions in school include governance, advocacy through parent teacher association, school councils, committees and other organizations. Schools that are most successful with involving parents prepare and reconsider all of their established methods of doing business and restructure in ways that home, community and schools are fundamentally balanced (Rudolph, 2000). Hoover- Dempsey and Sandler (1995) cited the fundamental of involvement in decision making as these three constructs:

- (a) Parental role in a child's life,
- (b) Sense of efficacy for helping success, general invitations, demands, and
- (c) Opportunities for parental involvement presented by child and school.

The decision making function of parents in school involvement is utterly important and must be handled delicately (Epstein et.al.) Although this function is critical to the school home con-

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nections, many schools may not have the financial assistance needed to create or aid this undertaking (Moll (1992).

Rudolph (2000) considered that despite the recognition of various types of parental involvement in schools, parents have varying responses on how involved they want to be. Moll (1992) supported parents having a “fund of knowledge” to share with the school and community, because parents need to be totally involved using this knowledge to inform school governance. Chavkin (1993) promoted several studies of low-income, minority parents who have reported different beliefs about parental roles in school governance. Chavkin’s study also found that stakeholders understanding of cross cultural and cross area issues are important to shared decision making in parental involvement. Parents as stakeholders are the first to be affected by transitions in school governance , as a result, their perceptions of involvement in decision making is a reported advantage to school climate and culture (Rudolph 2000). Flourishing school programs include parents as active partners in the school

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restructuring process by creating an organizational structure for parental involvement, such as parent and volunteer committees (Funkhouser & Gonzales, 1997). Catsambis and Garland (1997) suggested that most parents welcomed opportunities to communicate with their child's teacher and many desired a greater role in their school's decision-making process. Although shared decision making is challenging due to its intricacies, Epstein (1997) proposed several strategies for parents and school as an initiation:

- (a) Provide information on school or local elections for parent representatives,
- (b) Create networks to link parents with parent representatives, and
- (c) Allow independent advocacy groups to lobby for school reforms and improvements.

Hughes and Hooper (2000) found a significant increase with parental involvement in schools that implemented Epstein's (1997) proposal. On the contrary, Miller (1995) argued that

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shared decision making is inconsistent and impacts student achievement in modest ways, while noteworthy reforms were initiated, the push for implementation usually arrive from the principal as opposed to parent and school personnel (Weiss, 1995). In spite of this development, when making references to the relationship between parents and schools in the decision making process, stakeholders; educational researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners focus on home and school as closely connected partners.(Spann, Kohler & Soenksen, 2003).

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THE NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP

Parents tend to be less involved in the educational process as their children get older (Epstein & Conner, 1995). The National Education Goal (1995) chronicled 65% of parents helping first graders with homework, but only 14% by eighth grade. This decline in involvement is the result of a variety of challenges that parents face making their involvement difficult (Puma, Jones, & Fernandez, 1993). Westerga and Galloway (2004) studied numerous middle and high schools and found teachers perceptions of parents seemed to be partially influenced by demographic factors, such as the parent's education, SES, or marital status. Further findings revealed other socio-demographic factors, such as the child's age, gender, race, family structure, and/or mobility, as critical in shaping teachers perceptions of parental involvement.

The No Child Left behind Act requires that parents play a vital role in the education of their children (Hynes, 2006). As consumers, parents are entitled to have information about their

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children's curriculum and instructors. Schools must improve professional development for teachers and organize effective partnership programs. Principals must also help parents understand state standards and assessments. Epstein (2004) found that more than 200 middle level schools across the country have begun to address these NCLB requirements. As a result, many middle schools are notifying parents about school events in multiple languages and setting up parent workshops (Hynes, 2006). Epstein (2004) believes that if parents are to work with schools, schools must provide them with the opportunities and support to become involved because too often schools expect parents to do it alone.

Epstein (2004) family study confirmed by Hynes(2006) middle school perceptions study found that developing effective partnership with parents requires that all school staff(principals, teachers, and support staff) create a school environment that welcomes parents and encourages them to ask questions and voice their concerns. In some cases, it is the overall climate of

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the school that most impedes parental involvement. Liantos (1992) acknowledged that the degree to which parents felt welcomed and heard was crucial to the health of school/home partnerships. In many instances, parental involvement was largely symbolic leaving parents to feel that schools were only paying lip service to meaningful partnering (Liantos). Berger (1995) noted also that once parents are able to assume meaningful roles within the school, some teachers might feel that their professional status was being challenged.

Epstein's (1990) research on family involvement of better-educated parents received higher teacher ratings on parental involvement surveys regarding effective partnership. Berger (2000) linked a direct relationship between parent behaviors and teacher perceptions of their involvement. Conversely, parents with high educational achievements may be perceived as threatening to untrained and insecure teachers, under these circumstances, parents have reported anxiety in partnerships (Holthe, 2000). When parents and teachers understand the ex-

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pectations of involvement as partners in student academic achievements, support takes shape along with reduction in the dropout rates.

Horn and West (1992) correlated parental involvement to strong influence on the dropout rate among students in middle school. In a longitudinal study of approximately 25,000 eighth graders, their perceptions suggested a strong relationship between parent involvement and whether or not a student dropped out of school between the 8th and 10th grades. In other studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) examined 704 low-income parents in Chicago of eighth grade students whose parents were highly involved; the results, 38 percent less likely to be retained. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornbusch (1990) agreed that students who dropped out of school reported that their parents rarely attended school events or helped with homework.

Building on Epstein's (1995) Type 1 parenting; helping all families establish home environments to support children as students and help schools to understand the families they serve

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are basic tenets to successful student achievements. The shared responsibilities of schools and parents emphasized that coordination and cooperation are complimentary in partnerships (Milton, 2006).

An investigation of demographic trends indicated that a rising number of school age children are at risk of academic failure and other major social problems (Maguire 2000; Usdan, 1991). Therefore, schools and parents should share the tasks of the socialization and education of children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Partnership requires that school staff provide parents with the information and training they need to become involved and that they reach out to parents with invitations to participate in their children's education (Epstein, 2004). Studies by the United States Bureau of commerce (1998) disclosed startling percentages of children under the age of eighteen living below the poverty level: For example, 14% of Caucasian children, 36% of African American, and 34% Hispanic children. Bronfenbrenner added that when teachers and parents work together, common goals for

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children can be achieved effectively. Scott (2005) examined how parental attitudes and involvement influence the performance of children in schools, and expressed the following findings:

- (a) Parental involvement in school activities is directly related to academic performance;
- (b) Socioeconomic status of parents does relate to a child's academic achievement;
- (c) In most cases the racial make-up, ethnicity, and parents activities at school, did not appear to be a significant predictor of parent involvement;
- (d) Parents educational level was found to be a good predictor in the levels of parental involvement.

Type 4 learning at home is critical to partnership in this respect. Epstein (1995) conceded that learning at home includes sharing information and engaging families about curriculum and homework activities. The parent/child involvement on the home front impacts student achievement than school level involvement (Desimone, 1999). Furthermore, Cotton and Wikelund (1989)

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established that parental involvement is effective in fostering achievement and affective gains at all levels, and schools are encouraged to engage and maintain this involvement through the middle school and secondary years.

In a study of nine middle schools exploring perceptions of poverty level and parental involvement (Hynes, 2006) found minimal differences between parents of students living in poverty and nonpoverty. The implication is that generally parents have high expectations for their children to succeed. Some used the resources that are available to them while others simply did not know how and where to seek resources. Furthermore, many parents in the same study expressed a moderate to high level of comfort when attending school events or working with children at home on learning activities. Recognizing this, Zelazo (1995) recommended that schools and teachers develop attitudes and policies reflective of the communities they serve. To this end, more parents may become involved in ways that are meaningful

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to them and acknowledged by the school, cultivating an educational partnership.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Providing staff development for teachers and administrators enabling them to work effectively with families and with each other as partners in the educational process is a sound educational experience and sets the stage for student academic achievement(Bermudez, & Marquez, 1996). Diversity within a school's teaching force may lead to increased knowledge and understanding of different cultural and socioeconomic issues for teachers, enhancing the ability of teachers to navigate successfully in diverse classrooms (Steven, 1994).

Christenson (2004) expressed:

The responsibility now upon educators who wish to remove barriers to parental involvement is to understand that family constraints is seminal to educators developing sensitivity and responsiveness to parents needs and desires for their children's schooling experiences.

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Educators must be sensitive to the status-oriented parental issues such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and number of adults in the home. However, the psychological aspects, including the parent's role conceptions, sense of self-efficacy related to involvement, attitudes toward education, and expectations for their children's performance should be a primary concern. (p. 8).

Studies by Walker and McCoy (1997) indicated that many teachers do not always understand students who are ethnically different from them. Researchers have recommended that orientation and training enhances the effectiveness of parental involvement (Collins, Moles & Cross 1982). Moreover, Cotton and Savard (1982) suggested presenting specific and deliberate orientation and training in several forms to teachers, administrators, and parents is beneficial for collaboration. Cotton and Wiklund (1989) signified benefits of comprehensive orientation and training activities, although other researchers who studied

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the extent of training reported that a little is better than a lot. Baker (1999) argued that teachers readily admit they have had very little training, if any, working with parents. Hiatt-Michael (2001); Shartrand, Kreider, and Erickson-Warfield (1994) established that professional development at school or district levels incorporates the role of parents and harness this parental power as a means of improving and sustaining student learning.

An analysis of teacher training programs by educational researchers found that teacher candidates receive minimal training in parental involvement concepts and strategies (Hiatt-Michael 2001). Other findings further suggested that most of these conclusion were often accentuated by graduates asked to evaluate the various aspects of their training programs, in these cases, Ferrara and Ferrara (2005) believed that graduates generally provided comments about the courses in which they learned subject matter content, but unanimously agreed that they need more training in parental communication, and parental involvement in classroom strategies. The responsibility of the school

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administrator is to act as a catalyst for changing the school and ensuring appropriate training for staff (Delpit & Perry, 1998).

Parents can assist in reinforcing this change.

VARIOUS WAYS OF INVOLVEMENT

The National Education Association (2000) compiled several practical strategies that parents perceived to be supportive in improving parental involvement.

- (a) Meet the teacher;
- (b) Talk about student interests and hobbies;
- (c) Seek ways to contribute to learning at home;
- (d) Visit the classroom regularly;
- (e) Explore and ask questions;
- (f) Remain current on school policies, schedules and rules;
- (h) Ask about opportunities to participate in the development of school policies (Flannery, 2004).

Although these strategies appear simplistic at best, Chavkin (1993) and Epstein (1992) affirmed that they contribute signifi-

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cantly to student academic achievements. Contrary, noteworthy numbers of research do not support parental involvement as a positive predictor of academic achievement. Anderson (1991) and Keith, Reimers, Fehrmenn, Pottebaum,& Aubey (1986) found that direct parental involvement has little or negative effects on the achievement of secondary school students. Despite these findings, Ballen and Moles (1994) supported the following direct approaches by schools to improve student academic performance.

- (a) Arrange transportation for parents, who do not own a vehicle;
- (b) Establish a home/school coordinator;
- (c) Develop programs, and act as liaison between teachers and parents;
- (d) Encourage dialogue in steering committees and task forces; and
- (e) Promote active parent teacher association participation.

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Because the dealings of low-income parents and schools are minute or nonexistent, and are linked directly to specific school practices, school practices need to change (Nicolaue & Ramos, 1990).

Lucas, Henze and Donato (1990) analyzed six middle schools in California and Arizona and reported that actively encouraged parental involvement provided a better environment for students to achieve success. The researchers concluded that schools perform a key position in influencing stages of parental involvement in student academic achievement. Other resourceful tactics perceived by both teachers and parents to be effective measures to increase involvement on the classroom levels as reported by Epstein (1992) include:

- (a) A clear and simple one-page reporting form from the teacher weekly conveying and exchanging information with the parents of each student,
- (b) Parent contact log,
- (c) Telephone contact and face-to-face,

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- (d) E-mail communication,
- (e) Sharing of helpful articles on topic of interest to parents, and
- (f) Organizing parent involvement portfolio with all the materials developed for active engagement to present at school events.

Henderson and Berla (1994) investigated numerous related studies with findings that supported the ability of parent, with the help of school personnel to create a positive home learning environment, communicate high and realistic expectations for their children's school performance, discuss future careers, and involve in all aspects of educational attainment, are the most accurate predictors of student academic success.

Alternatively, if schools treat parents as powerless or unimportant, or if schools discourage parents from taking an interest in their children's education this promotes the development of negative attitudes in parents and consequently in their children that inhibit school achievement(Henderson 1981).

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VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering is critical to sustaining a healthy and productive parental involvement relationship. Chavkin and William (1993) sustained that schools develop authentic partnership with parents and educate them on various levels to serve and support active involvement. Epstein (1995) Type Four parental involvement at school supports this finding. This Type referred to parent volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children in classrooms or in other areas of the school. Volunteering at school also involves parents who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events, attend workshops, and programs for their own educational or training development (Epstein, 1995).

Parental involvement requires time and effort. One key finding from the “Parents as School Partners” project was that few teachers receive training in how to work effectively with parents and families (Dodd, 2000). Across the country, teachers in the focus groups reported that they had not participated in any

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training or educational classes in parental involvement as part of their formal graduate training.

Yet, despite the pressure on schools to engage and work with parents, teachers, are not receiving training in this area (Dodd). Williams and Chavkin (1986) argued that it is the school administrator who serves as the catalyst in the school/home partnership. St. John (1995) further noted that principals, in particular, must realize that it is their attitude that, to a large degree, determines whether parents see themselves as unwelcome guests, instruments of school initiatives, or real partners in school restructuring.

Becher (1994) found that some teachers worry that parental involvement in the form of parent volunteers in the classroom might mean loosing control of their classroom. While some teachers welcome parent volunteers, others fear that parent volunteers will undermine their authority, disrupt their classroom, take over their teaching responsibilities, and refuse to follow their instructions and school regulations (Becher, 1994).

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Additionally, teachers reported that they are not certain how to involve parents and still keep their roles as experts (Ziegler, 1987). As a strategy used with precision, taking into account perceptions and attitudes of teachers, Ritter, Mont-Reynaud and Dornbusch (1993) contended that schools can increase the number of parent volunteers by varying their schedules so that more can participate as volunteers or serve as an audience at different times of the day and evening to alleviate some anxieties of teachers. Programs that tap the parent's talents, occupations, and interests can enrich curriculum and explore career options for students.

Christenson, Rounds, and Gorney (1992) recognized that when schools are specific in seeking volunteers for their programs, they are more successful in drawing them in. Several recruitment strategies suggested by Ostdick-Trembath (1999) include:

- (1) Assign a parent liaison.
- (2) Survey the community.

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- (3) Use a variety of recruitment techniques.
- (4) Arrange home visits.
- (5) Follow through with visits and invitations
- (6) Post teachers and principals outside the school
- (7) Ask parents to recruit other parents
- (8) Ask parents what they would like to do.
- (9) Schedule the first event outside the school.
- (10) Make the first event fun.
- (11) Most important, use the first event to capture parents' attention (Ostdick-Trembath, 1999).

To this end, several studies also revealed students to be more attentive and responsive with improved behavior when parents are in the school building. This type of involvement contributes to academic success (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989).

Collaboration is the theme and pattern in the contributing factors and overarches with Epstein (1995) Typology of parental involvement. Academic success is promising when home, school and community work together. Cowan (1989) maintained that

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together citizens create a new understanding of what education means to the community and what the community means to education. This cannot be expected to happen unless links are established, implemented, and followed through between home/school, and community. Simon (2001) concluded from a survey of 11,000 parents and 1,000 principals that regardless of the student background and prior achievement, volunteering activities positively influenced grades, attendance, and behavior and school preparedness of students.

CONCLUSION

The literature affirmed the plethora of research that substantiated the knowledge about parental involvement, the perceptions of stakeholders and its impact on student academic achievement. When schools understand the complex and diverse perceptions of the families they serve, schools are better able to create environments that nourish children as students and families as partners. Staff development for teachers and administrators open doors to renewed communication, and un-

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derstanding of parental involvement issues, resulting in a solid foundation for student academic achievement. In addition, review of the literature suggested that parents and teachers are concerned about how to be partners at involvement within the classroom without anxiety. To achieve this, the seven factors discussed cultivate trusting relationships, all creating a good recipe for parental involvement among educational stakeholders.

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3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Smith (2001) contended that while extensive research has been done on the impact of parental involvement at the elementary school level, limited research exists regarding the perceptions of educational stakeholders of various socioeconomic groups at the middle school level. This case study used open-ended interview protocols, surveys, and observations to obtain a full rich narrative of emerging themes and patterns to gain insights into the following questions:

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- (1) Is there a perception difference between low socio-economic status and high socio-economic status parents in the degree of parental involvement?
- (2) Do parents' perceptions influence the academic achievement of students at the middle school level?
- (3) Do teachers' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parents?
- (4) Do principals' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parents?

CASE STUDY

This case study utilized an in-depth multiple site qualitative case study methodology with quantitative descriptive statistical analysis. Trochim (2002) supported this theory when he said "anything that is qualitative can be assigned meaningful numerical value and these values can then be manipulated to

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help us achieve greater insight into the meaning of the data and to help us examine specific hypothesis”. A multiple site design format comparing groups strengthen a theory (Mirriam, 2001). Best and Kahn (1993) described the themes of qualitative research proposed by Patton (1990) and Boyd (2005) as naturalistic inquiry, inductive analysis, qualitative data, and personal contact and insight. Best and Kahn maintained that the aim of the researcher in naturalistic inquiry should be to describe real-world situations as they unfold naturally in a nonmanipulative, unobtrusive, and noncontrolling. Naturalistic inquiry relies upon the participant’s views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and upon the researcher becoming a part of the study (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Natural inquiry involves its ability to benefit from the previous experiences of the researcher (Boyd, 2005). As an elementary school teacher, at the time, the perspectives and experiences of the subjects were filtered through the lens of personal experiences both intellectually and emotionally. The

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inductive analysis utilized instrumentally to bring forth significant categories and interrelationships. The qualitative data evolved through thick descriptions. Public middle schools were selected and provided the study with variation in demographics and system population.

Mixed methods research is defined as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines qualitative and quantitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study. It makes use of the pragmatic method and system of philosophy. Mixed research logic of inquiry includes the use of induction (or discovery of patterns), deduction (testing of theories and hypotheses) and abduction (uncovering and relying on the best of a set of explanations for understanding one's results (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Mixed method research outlines the process and the procedure of obtaining the best answer to the research questions asked.

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Through both exposures researchers come to better understand the depth of the social epistemology being studied.

The study was non-experimental, no treatment of the subjects occurred. The purpose of this researcher was to collect and analyze data using purposive sampling. The intent of purposive sampling is not to achieve population validity; rather it is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants (Yin, 2003). The goal of this type of sampling procedure was to select cases that were likely to produce deep information about the study (Gall, et al. 2003). Participating middle schools parents were purposively selected for the interviews based on principal or teacher recommendation. Triangulation validated data accumulated from the surveys, questionnaires and interviews. The two public middle schools were chosen from a sample that met three criteria:

- (1) Comprising middle level grades, including grades six, seven, and eight,

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- (2) Implementing two or more of the six types of school and family partnership programs identified in Epstein's (1995) Typology of parental involvement; and
- (3) Varying demographics of racial, cultural and socio-economic groups.

POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The participating middle schools comprised of demographic variations in racial, cultural and socioeconomic status. Stakeholders were identified through snowball sampling using social networks. In snowball sampling, respondents are identified by meeting the criteria for inclusion in the study. Subsequently, asking respondents to recommend others they may know who also meet the criteria (Trochim, 2006). Interviews were conducted with 14 participants; six teachers, six parents and two principals. The sample populations were:

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The Bears Middle School located in a suburban setting, had an enrollment of approximately 1565 students with the composition of 1% American Indian or Alaska native, less than 1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 19% African American, 28% Hispanic, 5% multiracial and 46% Caucasian. The approximate number of instructional staff at this school was 65 with 3 administrators. The socio demographic structure was: 42% economically disadvantaged students, 8% limited English proficient and 14% student with disabilities. This school earned a “B” grade for school year 2005-2006 meeting the criteria for adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act. The principal, Mrs. Cook, an energetic and enthusiastic leader, was eager to share educational strategies with this researcher.

The Eagles Middle School located in a rural area of the district with 1130 students. The enrollment comprised the following racial distributions: 1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 3% African American, 65% Hispanic, 28% Multi-Racial, 28% Caucasian. This school had 3 administrators and 71 instructional

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staff. The socio-demographic student population included: 76% economically disadvantaged students, 28% limited English proficient, and 13% students with disabilities. This school earned “C” grade for school year 2005-2006 and has not met the federal adequate yearly progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind Act. Because more than half of the school’s population was deemed economically disadvantaged, the school qualified for Title I funding. Mr. Bell, the school’s Principal for three years, had a friendly demeanor. His challenge at the time was “just getting parents to show up for something”. At the time of our meeting, he was trying desperately to reach a parent whose child was in trouble for the third time during that week. As he told it:

This parent has had several addresses over a five month period, therefore, the last phone number and address on the emergency card is invalid, so I must try to locate and communicate with this parent somehow. This is one of the challenges he faced with some of our parents.

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Insights gained from this sampling directly influence policy, practice and future research.

PARTICIPANTS

The targeted level for this study was grades 6, 7 and 8 at public middle schools. The interview participants were six teachers; three from each site; six parents; three from each site; and two principals; one from each site. The study examined two schools, therefore equal numbers of parents, teachers and principals from varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds was represented. Selecting participants from multiple sites served to strengthen exactness, validity and stability of the findings and enhanced the external validity or generalizability of the study (Mirriam, 2001). All of the teachers at the schools totaling 136 were asked to complete the parental involvement survey. Of the 130 surveys distributed to the teachers, 42 were returned.

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Teachers, principals and parents purposively selected to participate in this study, with random sampling occurred with every tenth parent from the principal's computer generated list.

INSTRUMENTATION

Three types of instruments were used for the purpose of this book. First, a semi structured open ended 18 item interview question guide for principals, teachers and parents (Appendix I) developed and utilized by Lommerin (1999) in a study consisting of middle schools from varying socioeconomic backgrounds in a middle school setting. This protocol was appropriate because it embodies Epstein's (1995) six Typology of parental involvement on which this book is grounded. Secondly, the parental involvement survey also developed by Lommerin (1999) explored what middle level principals do to encourage and nurture parental involvement, was also appropriate for this study and pertinent to the literature reviews.

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DATA COLLECTION

Patton (1990) described three kinds of interviewing techniques: (a) formal conversational, (b) semi-structured interviews, and standard open-ended interviews. For the purpose of this study, the primary method of data collection was semi-structured open-ended interviews. With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer was given autonomy to probe within predetermined areas of inquiry and still remained focused while allowing respondents to answer in ways they desired (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). In all cases, one parent was interviewed at a time and at the school sites. Throughout each interview, the interviewer represented the learner by accepting all answers while smoothly prying for clarifications when necessary. Creswell (1998) described the researcher's role as an active learner telling the story from the participant's view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants (p. 18). All participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity and were given reminders that they could decline to answer any question and were

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free to terminate the interview at any given time without penalty. The guided interview questions lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were taped, later transcribed and analyzed. Patton (1990) believed the tape recordings helped to capture more data and made it easier for the interviewer to focus on the interview. Observational data described the settings, activities, and the people providing meaning of the event to readers. The only individual to view the transcripts, observational notes and surveys was the researcher named on the protocol. Pseudonyms were used for the names of the parents, teachers, and principals, as well as the schools to ensure confidentiality. Information obtained from observation presented a more complete description of the phenomena than would be pulled from surveys and interviews (Gall et al., 1996).

Surveys were sent to every teacher at both middle schools in mid March. Of the 136 instructional staff purposively selected, 42 instructional staff, and 28 parents of 200 randomly

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selected parents responded to the survey along with the two middle school principals. Seventy-two survey respondents and 14 interviewees participated in the study. The surveys were sent out on a Wednesday, and the participants were asked to return the surveys on or before the Friday of the following week. Each teacher in each individual class distributed the surveys to their students to be given to parents on Wednesday. The parents were asked to return the completed surveys to teachers in a sealed envelope provided to them. When teachers collected the surveys from students, they were placed in a color coded box in the main office of the schools, along with his/her own, and collected by the researcher on the last day. Fourteen participants were interviewed about the same area of research. This provided an opportunity to compare what each participant reported. Teachers and principals interviews compared data diagonally with the survey data. Patton (2002) suggested that the purpose of interviewing is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective and that qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that

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the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to make explicit.

Six parents were selected by the principals to participate in the interview, and six teachers volunteered based on the criteria. Interviews with teachers were held during planning periods and with parents after school hours in a designated area of the school provided by the Administrator. Data from surveys triangulated interviews which determined consistency in perceptions of the stakeholders. The multi-method approach of triangulation checked the validity and reliability of data sources by collaboration (Gall, et al., 1996). By using a variety of sources and resources, the researcher built on the strengths of each type of data minimizing limitation of any single approach (Patton, 1990). This data collection provided thick rich descriptions of the perceptions of parental involvement among educational stakeholders which occurred from March 2007 to May 2007.

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF INSTRUMENTS

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The validity and reliability of the instruments were previously established. Permission to use the instruments was granted. Observational data used to describe the settings, activities, and the people, provided meaning of the event to readers. Additionally, the researcher's position stated clearly, and keeping a paper trail are techniques to ensure reliability (Brown, 1996). Furthermore, the findings of this study are consistent with previous studies. Audit trails used in this study promoted reliability.

This trail detailed how data collection occurred, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the study. The researcher's explanation of assumptions and focus of the study also served to strengthen reliability. Triangulation achievement was evident in the following ways: 14 participants were interviewed about the same area of research. This provided an opportunity to compare what each participant reported. Teachers and principals interviews compared data diagonally

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with the survey data. Triangulation is the method by seeking corroboration from multiple types of data source (Gall, et al., 2003).

VALIDITY

Research provided a lens through which the participants' stories unfolded, the researcher fairly attempted not to divulge to any participant preconceptions or biases regarding parental involvement. As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, interpretations of the reality were assessed through the researcher's interviews, observations, and surveys. Understanding that observations are a researcher's and participant's construction of reality, the researcher provided summary obtained from the interviews to the participants for their review, giving participants the opportunity for feedback. This helped to further clarify participant's position relating to the research

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questions, and assisted readers to understand the reality of researcher and participants.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis is the researcher's process of systematically searching and arranging interviews, transcripts, field notes and other materials to increase one's understanding of those data to present the discoveries to others (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Data was coded and analyzed for recurrent themes. The challenge of qualitative research is to take raw data, logically arrange it so that it is meaningful and beneficial to others (Yin, 2003). After each interview session, the recorded tapes were reviewed and transcribed. The participants' responses were summarized, seeking themes, and discrepancies. Data from interviews was analyzed through the category construction method consisting of organizing the data sources, reducing the text, and generating conceptual categories, themes, and patterns by coding units of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Coding is the heart and soul of whole text analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Working with

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data, the researcher must at all times remain focused on the research questions (Yin, 2003). Creswell (1998) adds:

The researcher then finds statements (in the interviews) about how individuals are experiencing the topic, lists out these significant statements (horizontalization of the data), and treats each statement as having equal worth, and works to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. These statements are then grouped into “meaningful units,” the researcher lists these units, and he or she writes a description of the “textures” (textural description) of the experience – what happened – including verbatim examples. (p. 147).

The goal of this data analysis was to create descriptive multi-dimensional categories consistent with the theoretical framework to answer the research questions. The checklists yes/no survey data (Appendices, F, G, and H) were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. The different

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forms of data collection were used to triangulate the data and multiple perspectives were captured via sampling of parents, teachers and principals.

CONCLUSION

Chapter 3 contained an overview of the methodology and procedures for this study. This examination included interviews, observations, and surveys of parents, teachers, and principals the public middle schools to better understand the perceptions of stakeholders relevant to parental involvement at the middle school level. In Chapter 4, the data was categorized and presented through emergent themes that addressed each of the research questions.

4

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The chapter is organized around the following research questions. (a) Is there a perception difference between low socio-economic status and high socio-economic status parents in the degree of parental involvement? (b) Do parents' perceptions impact the academic achievement of students at the middle school level? (c) Do teachers' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent? (d) Do principals' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent?

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RESEARCH QUESTION ONE

Is there a perception difference between low socio-economic and high socio-economic parents in the degree of parental involvement?

Many times educators associate socioeconomic conditions with academic achievement. Epstein and Dauber (1991) explained that perceptions of socioeconomic status (SES) may influence parental involvement in student academic achievement. While investigating the research question posed, Epstein's and Dauber's finding showed prevalence throughout the data and emerged a major theme from the transcribed notes. This theme, *disconnection in educational partnership*, illustrates that socioeconomic factors are vital to the types of parental involvement activities parents participate in and supports the notion that difference exist between low socio-economic and high socio-economic parents in the degree of parental involvement. Interviews, surveys and observations through this study revealed an

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overwhelming disconnection in other areas as well. The following sections outlines the disconnection in terms of involvement activities .The findings and results are presented within the framework of Epstein's six Typologies of parental involvement.

Type 1: Parenting is the development of practices that facilitates families establishing home environments to support children as students.

Type 2: Communicating is the design of effective forms of communication by schools that promote effective school to home and home to school communication about school programs and children progress.

Type 3: Volunteering is parent becoming involved by volunteering at school and serving as an audience for school performances.

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- Type 4: Learning at home is parents helping students at home with homework and other curriculum related activities.
- Type 5: Decision making is parents becoming involved in school decisions and developing as parent leaders and representatives by participating on boards and committees.
- Type 6: Collaboration with community is community resources and agencies becoming integrated with school programs and fostering a shared responsibility for children (Epstein, 1995, p.704).

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TYPES AND FREQUENCIES

The frequency with which respondents indicate their involvement practice is displayed on table 1. Adjacent to each Type is the frequency with which parents mentioned their participation in the practice. This table also indicated the occurrence with which respondents mentioned each Type of involvement. The number of respondents participating in each Type mirror the level of participation in each Type and can be interpreted as the level of importance each Type is perceived as having. The number in brackets shows the total number of parent respondents who participated in the survey.

Table 1

Number of Occasion Parents Respondents Mentioned Involvement

Type of Activity	Income of \$55,999 and > [28]	Income of \$55,999 and < [28]
Parenting	100%	100%
Home-School Communication	71%	29%

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Volunteering 61% 36%
Number of Occasion Parents Respondents Mentioned Involvement(contd)

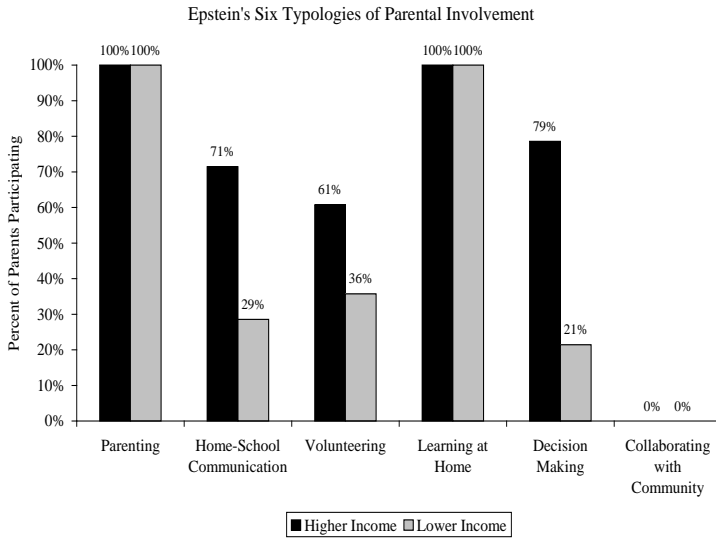
Type of Activity Income of \$55,999 and > [28] Income of \$55,999 and < [28]

Learning at Home	100%	100%
Decision Making	79%	21%
Collaborating With Community	0%	0%

Although both groups of parents indicated some type of parental involvement, respondent parents who earned an income of \$55,999.00 and greater were most frequently involved in home-school communication, decision making and volunteering Types of activities, whereas parents respondents with earned income of \$55,999.00 or less denoted learning at home and parenting as the major types of involvement activities they were frequently engaged in. Noteworthy, both groups of parents signified parenting and learning at home as one in the same activity relating to in-

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volvement. Based on these findings, parents who range within the higher income bracket were likely to be involved in the deci-



sion making process than parents who earned lower income.

Figure 1 provides an illustration of the differences between the two income groups.

Figure 1. Parental Involvement by Epstein Typology.

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PARENTING PERCEPTIONS

Parenting activities (Type 1) such as setting home conditions, expectations for behavior, or supervision of time were important to most respondent parents as involvement in education. The results indicate both SES parents supporting this Type 100%. Data analysis found that although most respondent parents saw parenting activities as crucial to academic success, they mostly agreed that middle school was a place where students can be granted freedom. As one parent pointed out during the interview when asked: How do you believe parents are involved in their children's learning? One parent (PA) responded that "students at this stage need to try to work stuff out on their own "sink or swim" but still get the support they need at home". There were no significant differences in how either parent of the different SES group reports parenting styles. However, based on data analysis, inconsistencies were found in almost all the other areas.

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COMMUNICATION

Communication with teachers and principals (Type 2) was not very high on the list of lower income parents' responses. In fact, 42% fewer parents of lower income in this category reported this involvement Type of activity. Based on data analysis, decision making activities and home/school communication activities were prevalent among higher income earners. Analysis also revealed that some lower income parents viewed schools as not forthcoming with communication, and parents initiating communication. Ms. Mosley (PA), Store Clerk, explained her way of communicating with her daughter's teachers, she stated:

Communication plays a major role in how teachers get parents involved. I try to e-mail my daughter's teacher at least once per month just to touch base. Sometimes, my daughter brings home newsletters but to be honest, I rarely read it because there is always something going on. I sometimes work long hours and mostly depend on the

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babysitter. So, not to feel guilty, I initiate the contact (personal communication, May 5, 2007).

The implication was that communication between home/school was generally intact. However, because of time restraint and other challenges, parents of lower SES follow through with making the call to schools as follow up to subsequent communication, not necessarily to initiate contact. The correlation between parents who actively participate in the decision making process (71%) and parents not involved in the home/school communication Type (21%) of involvement is striking (see Figure 1). The data suggest that communication and decision making are interwoven (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Results from the parents' interview further revealed that parents of lower SES generally are willing to be involved and often find ways to do so although faced with difficult challenges. Several examples stated by Ms. Mosley and others alluded to working long hours, limited time off, limited modes of communication, feeling uncomfortable when speaking to school

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personnel were obstacles to communicating with middle school personnel . This finding is consistent with Ramey and Ramey (1994) analysis of how many lower SES parents faced major challenges when providing optimal care and education for their children. The finding also suggests that parents who participated in the home/ school communication Types of activities were most likely the ones to be involved in the decision making processes at the schools.

VOLUNTEERISM

Most parents responded with examples of volunteering or playing other supportive roles at the school (Type 3), when asked to describe essential ways they had been involved in their children's middle school education. The implication was that higher income parents tend to be more involved in volunteering activities which is consistent with the results that are reported in Table 1 and Figure 1. Mrs. Mendez (PA), Executive, explained her volunteering activities:

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I helped to tutor students, mentor students or volunteer in other areas where the school needs are, or more specific activities in my daughter's classroom. I find that parents are not as involved as they ought to be because they are so busy at home, and as their children get older and can "look after" themselves, parents begin to work longer hours, making this a disconnection between home and school (personal communication, May 5, 2007).

Other parents reported that they would like to be volunteers in the school but school never asked. The findings indicate inconsistencies among the different socio-economic class of parents regarding volunteering. For example, parents, who were able to volunteer, do so frequently at a rate of 61%, others who were unable, most likely saw this as a barrier resulting in 21% participation rate(see Figure 1). This implies that higher income parent volunteers were abreast of school policies and procedures because the communication process was important to them. Further analysis from the interview revealed that lower income parents

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were generally willing to be involved in volunteering Type of activities, but barriers such as time, lack of invitation, and transportation were issues for them.

LEARNING AT HOME PERCEPTIONS

Both groups of parents signified the importance of learning at home and also viewed this Type of activity as daily routine. When questioned specifically, they willingly acknowledged the importance in their child's middle-school experience and tied their responses in with parenting. One (PA), a Migrant Worker, described the daily routine of parenting as learning at home:

I pick up my child from school in the evenings.

On the way home I try to find out about homework and other things that happen in school. As soon as we get home, he prepares a snack and then jump right into homework. If he says no homework, I believe him. That's what parents are

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supposed to do (personal communication. May 2, 2007).

Another example of Type 1 and Type 4 combination as explained by Mrs. Rodriquez, Stay at Home Mom:

Parents are allowed to go to the school board meetings, to have a say in policies, but again, most parents are not aware, I don't think. At certain schools, parent input are welcome, here, I am not sure. Generally, most parents don't know that they can question the school system.

This has a lot to do with the education level of parent and how they are treated. Sometimes, I am a little intimidated, a little afraid of how I might come across when asking questions about what I should be doing at home to help my child further (personal communication, May 2, 2007).

The analysis suggests that low and high income parents saw learning at home and parenting as one in the same Type of parental involvement activity and requires

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similar provisions as that of parenting. This finding is consistent with the field notes and observations. According to the field note, parents mentioned “meeting basic needs” of children over 10 times when referencing learning at home.

DECISION MAKING PERCEPTIONS

Parents who listed decision-making (Type 5) as a parental involvement activity, referred to their participation in the school’s parent/teacher organizations. Several parents noted that they had served on the parent teacher and student association/school advisory committee (PTSA/SAC). Others, such as Mrs. Woods, referred to her service on school improvement teams. Data analysis revealed parents who were able to participate in the decision making activities appeared to be the ones who frequently volunteered in other school related activities. The analysis further revealed an overwhelming statistical difference (see Table 1) between the two groups of parents in the decision making area. The finding indicates similarities of per-

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ceptions between parents in decision making, volunteering and communicating types of activities.

COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY

In the identification of (Type 6) collaborating with the community as activities of parental involvement, 0% of parents directly relate this Type of parental involvement to education involvement. Through direct observation and field notes, the schools provided resources to parents for educational enrichment. These included night activities for parents, limited English language resources, and health resources for families, community resource such as daycare, and other services. The programs were sent home with students or mailed to the parents' home monthly in the form of newsletters or flyers to inform parents of these activities. Data revealed that this Type of parental involvement (Type 6) is not acknowledged by either SES group of parents as relevant to parental involvement. Therefore parents' responses did not differ based on income. Revealed in the theme, disconnection in partnership was the message that paren-

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tal involvement was not clearly defined for middle school parents.

RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

Do parents' perceptions impact the academic achievement of students at the middle school level?

To gain an understanding of parents' perceptions relevant to the question being studied, six parents were interviewed using the same 21 items questionnaire (appendix D). The survey and interview data were reviewed, compiled and analyzed. Nine survey questions and responses were deemed significant enough to assist in the examination of the research question posed. Becher's (1984) results implied that students with high academic achievement had parents with high expectations for them and parents in turn saw themselves as "teachers" of their children as they modeled and reinforced learning. This finding is consistent with the themes that emerged from the analyzed data.

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An examination of the research question revealed two themes. These themes, *commitment and responsibility* emerged during the interviews with parents.

The themes suggest that parents saw their primary responsibility as teachers and providers of the fundamental structure for their children. The survey conducted with parents support these themes. Parents communicated that they work with children at home without the benefit of clear communicated expectations from school personnel. Table 2 summarizes the survey questions.

Table 2

Responses to Specific Survey Questions from Parents of Lower SES

Survey Questions	Participants Responding “Yes”
N= 28	
Parents serve on advisory committee	39%
Principal make self available to parents	46%

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Responses to Specific Survey Questions from Parents of Lower SES(contd)

Survey Questions	Participants Responding “Yes”
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N= 28

Parents work with children at home	100%
School seek feedback from parents through surveys	14%
Principal communicate expectations to parents	21%
Teachers are willing to involve parents	25%
Teacher makes time to meet with parents	25%
School understands cultural background	11%
Opportunities for parents to be educated about curriculum and school functioning	25%

The findings suggest that although parents nurture, guide and motivate children at home, the middle schools expectations of parental involvement were unclear to them. Data indicate that less than the majority of lower SES parents reported lack of middle schools expectations communicated to them. According to the survey, there is a need for direct principal/ parent commu-

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nication of expectations. Furthermore, result indicate parents perceptions of teacher willingness to involve them, school understanding of the students cultural background and opportunities provided parents to be educated about curriculum and school functioning were relative to parent SES status. As a result, low SES parents do not have a good feeling about parental involvement at school and view the commitment of school personnel in a generally questionable way. Table 3 indicates the results of parents from higher SES level of participants.

Table 3
Responses to Specific Survey Questions from Parents of Higher SES

Survey Questions	Participants Responding “Yes”
N= 28	
Parents serve on advisory committee	61%
Principal make self available to parents	54%
Parents work with children at home	100%
School seek feedback from parents through surveys	86%

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Responses to Specific Survey Questions from Parents of Higher SES(contd)

Survey Questions	Participants Responding “Yes”
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N= 28

Principal communicate expectations to parents	79%
Teachers are willing to involve parents	75%
Teacher makes time to meet with parents	75%
School understands cultural background	89%
Opportunities for parents to be educated about curriculum and school functioning	75%

Comparatively, the implication that both parents of high and low SES demographics worked with children at home and is consistent. The commitment theme is prominent in the areas of teacher willingness to involve parents, school understanding of the students cultural background and opportunities provided parents to be educated about curriculum and school functioning. Results suggest high SES parents have a good feeling about pa-

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rental involvement at school and viewed the commitment of school personnel in a generally warm way.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES

The qualitative analysis provides a more personal view of both themes. Six parents of varied demographics participated in the parent interview process and agreed to be tape recorded. The interviews were later transcribed into over 20 pages of notes.

Commitment

The first theme of *commitment* emerged from the analyzed data. When asked about the things family members do at home to support their children's learning. One hundred percent of participants responded with "getting the children up, making sure they are fed, getting them to school on time, and being prepared to do work". Parents who are able to nurture, motivate and be persistent with their children are more likely to have academically successful students reported one (PA). Can a school that is perceived to be lacking commitment toward lower SES

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parents rise to the occasion? One parent seems to think so, she explained:

The needs of all parents should be taken into consideration when encouraging parents to become involved in school affairs. This school is currently not doing that, they don't ask for feedback from us, if they did, we would make suggestions and maybe, just maybe, it would make a difference (personal communication, May 2, 2007).

Another (PA) voiced that "most parents are committed in children's education and that money plays little role in how committed a parent is". Interview data is consistent with the survey findings of lower SES parents (see Table 3). When asked about the extent to which families have a say in determining school policies and programs, the parents who frequently volunteered indicated comfort in knowing their roles and responsibilities in finding out about curriculum and other school policies, whereas parents who saw teachers as unwilling to in-

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volve them were unsure of policies and steps to take be involved. Therefore, this finding is consistent with the survey analysis (see Table 3 & 4). Both groups of participant further perceived parenting types of activities such as working with children at home and providing supervision to impact children positively.

Responsibility

The second theme to materialize during the data analysis summarizes parents responsibility. Interviewees were asked “To what extent is parent and to what extent the school is responsible for children’s learning? Majority of the parents’ participants indicated that parents were primarily responsibility for children’s learning. Several parent shared their voices, Mrs. Wood, “My role as a parent is to get my child to school and make everything he is interested in a priority” Mrs. Mosley perceived “trying to be involved when I can has had some impact on my child’s academic achievement”. Mrs. Rodriquez, “parents need to take more responsibilities and be accountable for their children’s

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learning at home. It's not the teacher's responsibility; it's my responsibility as a parent to make sure my child gets what she needs". The parent data concurred with the survey findings of Table 3 and shows an overall gap in perceptions between high and low SES status parents.

RESEARCH QUESTION THREE

Do teachers' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent?

For the exploration of this research question, six teachers were interviewed using the same 21 items questionnaire (Appendix D). The data were reviewed, compiled, analyzed and cross checked against the surveyed data. Data analysis suggests that the actions of the leader contributed to how parents re-act to parental involvement activities. Generally, teachers' perceptions of parental involvement at school are somewhat positive. The data revealed an overwhelming correlation in teachers' perceptions of how accessible the principal was to parents and how

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parents worked with children at home. Table 4 provides in more detail the specific teacher survey questions and the results.

Table 4

Responses to Survey Questions from Teacher

Survey Questions	Participants Responding “Yes”
N=42	
Parents serve on advisory committee	29%
Principal make self available to parent	45%
Parents work with children at home	45%
School seek feedback from parents through surveys	55%
Principal Communicate expectations to parents	60%
Teachers are willing to involve parents	100%
Teacher makes time to meet with parents	100%
School understands cultural background	93%
Opportunities for parents to be educated about curriculum and school functioning	55%

Data analysis indicates teachers’ willingness to involve parents, make time to meet with parents, and support the general

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idea that the expectations of parental involvement are communicated to parents by principals. The results of the analysis suggest that teachers' perceptions of leadership toward promoting parental involvement needs to be strengthened (see Table 4). Based on the survey data three themes emerged. The themes, *timekeeper*, *manager and communicator*, suggest the need for guidance and support in the promotion of parental involvement and is consistent with the data analysis of the interviews and field notes.

Timekeeper

The theme teacher as Timekeeper summarizes the primary perceptions of teachers. When asked about the types of things family members do at home to support children learning, the majority of the teachers believed that family members were not doing nearly enough to encourage learning, especially at the middle school level. In fact, several responses from teachers were: "Some parents allow middle school students far too much freedom, more time on recreational activities, but not nearly enough time on assisting children to succeed in school". Another

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(T) explained “some parents considered the time needed to be involved in their children’s education more of a burden with making time to be involved in their children’s education than a benefit”. And still another (T) explained that parents were doing less now in middle school than they were doing in elementary school”. The data revealed that while teachers addressed parents across SES boundaries, more emphasis were directed to working class parents, not necessarily lower income earners. Field notes analysis indicated teachers referring to parents who work constantly as “mortgage poor”-meaning parents with mortgages but having to work multiple jobs to maintain the family, citing less time to spend with children at home and less time for parental involvement at school. The implication was that time taken away from parenting Types of activities meant more time on behavior management in the classroom and not on academics subjects infuriating many teachers.

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Communicator

The next theme *communicator* looks at limitations and involvement. Majority of the teachers agreed that no limitations should be placed on what parents should do at home to help their children .When asked about how parents learned about the curriculum, the mass of interviewed teachers mentioned written communication, events, and special activities at school as significant ways parents learn about curriculum and children's progress. Field notes and observational data implied that lower SES parents were less likely to attend most events based on the number of times the teachers referred to this group during the interviews. The data indicate that communication was a major factor regarding parental involvement and was likely to make or break parental involvement programs.

Results also suggest the current methods of school/home communication were not effective, and school personnel should focus on using other methods to get to the end-users. One teacher (T) explained that communication is one of the largest barriers

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to parental involvement, especially getting across to limited English speakers or illiterate parents. The remedy as explained by another teacher” to fix this problem with every piece of communication that was sent home in both Spanish and English”. Still another teacher asked,” If we send information home in English alone, how would parents know how to be involved and that they can be involved!” Interview data indicate that teachers believe parents do care but might not understand how and when to be involved.

Promoter

The final theme summarize teacher as promoter in parental involvement. Almost all interviewed teachers agreed that some lower socioeconomic parents were not likely to volunteer on their own, but were open to suggestions from teachers or principals on how they can participate. Mrs. Scott (T) said “If I call and ask for parents to come in for a specific event or to do something, most parents will be happy to. Data implied that taking the initial step was important to teachers when involving

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some lower SES parents. Although majority of teachers established that they were willing to make time, they were vocal in saying that parents are not always receptive of the invitations. This statement is consistent with most research findings as reported by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1998) consistent and positive contact among parents, teachers and advisors help to foster a climate of trust between the most important influences in young people's development.

RESEARCH QUESTION FOUR

Do principals' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent?

To examine principals' perceptions relevant to the question, two principals were interviewed using the same 17 items questionnaire (see Appendix E). The data were reviewed, compiled and analyzed. Data analysis suggest middle school principals saw communication with parents as strength, referring to examples such as newsletters, notes, telephone calls, web sites, parent or-

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ganization meetings as tools used to communicate with parents. Principals expressed views that were more positive than the parents.

Principals communicated that parental involvement programs at the schools were encouraged but parents, particularly some lower SES parents fail to participate. These actions were summarized in the survey questions (see Table 5). For example, principals make self available to parents, principals communicate expectations to parents, schools understand cultural background, and schools seek feedback from parents through surveys. The data illustrate that the tone and opportunities for parental involvement at the schools are intact.

Table 5
Responses to Survey Questions from Principals

Survey Questions	Percent Responding “Yes”
N= 2	
Parents serve on advisory committee	100%
Principal make self available to parents	100%

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Parents work with children at home	60%
School seek feedback from parents through surveys	100%
Principal communicate expectations to parents	100%
Teachers are willing to involve parents	100%
Teacher makes time to meet with parents	100%
School understands cultural background	100%
Opportunities for parents to be educated about curriculum and school functioning	100%

Even though it appeared from the interviews and surveys that principals were making efforts to involve parents, the traditional perceptions that occasional parental involvement through regularly scheduled PTO meeting or conference night is effective, may not be the case. Data from the field notes of parents indicated possible lost opportunities for practical parental involvement due to unclear or lack of communicated expectations of activities related to parental involvement specifically to lower SES parents. Four themes emerged from the survey and interview analysis, *principal as director, character builder, and*

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connector during the analysis process. These themes suggest that principals have to set expectations for both parents and teachers, promote cultural diversity and encourage parental involvement at all levels.

Director

The first theme *principal as director* summarizes principals' willingness to involve parents and make time for them. The findings suggest that principals are willing to encourage and indicate teachers' willingness to involve parents in parental involvement activities. As explained by one principal:

We give much but get very little in return. We as educators are constantly encouraging parents to come in to volunteer, to come in for conferences, to serve as audience for something. But if parents fail to respond, then there isn't much left to do. We can't, force them to be part of their children's educational experiences at school. We can only set the expectations (personal communication, May, 2, 2007).

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The researcher's field notes support the claim by principal that they care about promoting parental involvement at their schools. According to the field notes, principals consistently made mention of and showed copies of programs scheduled for monthly parental involvement activities. This data suggest strength in the principals' encouragement of teachers and parents and is consistent with the most current research findings. However, the implication was that the traditional ways of reaching "hard to reach parents" were not resonating. Schools need to become more active in communicating with parents in more creative ways. It is the obligation of the schools to reach out to parents by directly involving them in understanding what is being taught, specific curriculum expectations, and how they can help at home (Myers & Monson, 1992).

Character Builder

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The second theme principal as *character builder* summarizes the interview and supports the survey finding in the following ways. One hundred percent of principals report the importance of middle school education and the critical stage for students' growth and academic achievement. One principal explained "this is a critical stage of physical, mental and emotional changes that parents really need to understand and be in partnerships with schools in helping to develop the character education and academics of students". Another principal reasoned:

When it comes to how actively parents are involved, on a personal level with their children, we have a whole range of levels of involvement. One can generally tell when one meets with parents of students in trouble which parents really have no idea what's been going on, and when you call about discipline problems, there are a bunch of indicators as to whether or not parents are involved (personal communication, May 2, 2007).

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The implication was that character development for the typical middle school student was as important as academic guidance. If this was not clear expectations, then it become the responsibility of the leader to emphasize what character is and what it means so parents understand clearly .This is particularly important to the parents of students who the principals call “challenged student”. This analysis is also consistent with Eccles and Howard (1993) findings that when parents believe that they can affect their children’s education, share perceptions on child development, and believe that the school desires their help, a feeling of comfort develops making for significant milestones in the parental involvement process.

Connector

The third theme ***connector*** suggests that principals are aware and constantly promote diversity issues within the schools. Observational data revealed cultural posters of children of different ethnicity and cultural background posted in plain view around the school building, the population of the teaching

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staff is reflective of the student population in culture and ethnicity. The question of whether or not the principals understand the cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the parents, 100% of principals stated affirmatively. One (P) replied:

Culture is important. We have a high Hispanic population and a high percentage of low socio-economic students and understanding what those families have to deal with on a day to day basis is very important to us here (personal communication, May, 2, 2007).

When asked about the differences in how low and high socio-economic parents participate in involvement, one principal stated:

I have been at three middle schools, one middle school was really a very blue collar middle class, the other middle school was affluent, and this middle school where the majority of the students are on free or reduced lunch. Yes, I think socio-economic factors play a big role; it makes a big difference in how parents are involved and

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also depend on how and when they are involved (personal communication, May, 2, 2007).

The data indicate that principals acknowledge that impediments exist not because of money, but rather in parents' lack of understanding regarding how they could contribute. This theme revealed a connection between low and high SES parents and their levels of involvement. This observation is consistent with Hynes (2006) analysis of parents having high expectations for their children to succeed. Some used the resources that are available to them while others simply do not know how and where to seek resources. From the survey, interviews, observations and field notes, it was clear that principals' perceptions of parental involvement depend on the socioeconomic factors of parents.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a summary of the findings and results. This study examines the perceptions of stakeholders at public middle schools and identifies whether there are differences in perceptions of educational stakeholders. First data was

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collected from teachers, principals, and parents through survey.

Second, personal communications were conducted to gain in-

sights from stakeholders regarding parental involvement. In

chapter five, the summary, conclusions, and implications of this

research study are presented.

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5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study and participating educational stakeholders and schools are *not* intended to be representative of the general population of parents, teachers and principals. Instead, the stakeholders were purposefully selected based upon criterion to participate in the study. It was assumed that the 14 interviewed participants and the 72 surveyed respondents provided truthful and honest response and explanations based on their levels of parental involvement practices. The goal of this chapter was to list each research questions and incorporate spe-

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

cific findings, formulate recommendations for future research and present implications.

RESULTS

This in-depth multiple site qualitative case study methodology with quantitative descriptive statistical analysis used open-ended interview questionnaires, surveys, and observations to obtain a full rich narrative of emerging themes to gain insights into the specific research questions in this chapter. Mixed method research outlines the process and the procedure of obtaining the best answer to the research questions asked (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

The goal of this design was not to achieve population validity; rather it was to obtain comprehensive understanding of the participants (Yin, 2003). The qualitative procedures were transcribed and compiled to obtain perspectives and recommendations for future improvement of parental involvement programs.

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Research Question Number 1.

Disconnection in Educational Partnership

Is there a perception difference between low socio-economic and high socio-economic parents in the degree of parental involvement?

Educational researchers recognized that when parents and teachers understand the expectations of involvement as partners in student academic achievements, support takes shape along with reduction in the dropout rates. (Holthe 2000; Horn and West,1992; Berger ,2000) taken with Epstein's (1995) Type 1 parenting; helping all families to establish home environments to support children as students and help schools to understand the families they serve are basic tenets to successful student achievements. The shared responsibilities of schools and parents emphasized that coordination and cooperation are complimentary in partnership. Yet, this study indicated grave indifference to that finding.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sample-specific finding. Volunteering, home-school communication and decision making were reported as major Types of parental involvement and critically important to the partnership in education. Yet, data findings suggest a significant disconnection in perceptions between high and lower income parents. Findings revealed a 58% difference in the perceptions of decision making, 42% variance in home-school communication, and over 50% discrepancies in volunteering. This scenario placed lower SES parents at a disadvantage while providing higher SES parents 150% more visibility in classrooms, increased knowledge on school policies and programs, and school input.

Population generalized conclusion. This study identified the perceptions difference between low and high socioeconomic parents in the degree of parental involvement. The numbers revealed a decrease in the types of parental activities parents with low SES and high SES parents participated in. This would imply

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that socioeconomic factors likely impact student academic achievement.

Research Question Number 2.

Responsibility and Commitment.

Do parents' perceptions impact the academic achievement of students at the middle school level?

Sample-specific findings. One hundred percent of parents' stakeholders indicated commitment and responsibility to their children's academic success. The irony was that despite not fully understanding the expectations of middle school parental involvement, parents were cultivating ways to impact their children's life positively. This finding is consistent with Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) study of middle school parental involvement. They found the methods that were put forward to motivate parents to become engaged in a child's education have not been clearly understood. To this end, 75% of the parental groups of stakeholders were not educated about curriculum and school functioning, nor were they given opportunities to participate in

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these types of activities. There were a variety of reasons parents were not involved in these activities. Of the six parents interviewed, 60% of the participants were limited English speakers, 30% worked long hours and others indicted other reasons for non-involvement in activities at school.

Funkhouser and Gonzales (1997) found that flourishing school programs include parents as active partners in the school restructuring process by creating an organizational structure for parental involvement. This was not the case in this specific study.

Population generalized conclusion. This study indicated that despite parents' short comings or economic conditions, most parents wanted their children to have a better life than they had, so they provided this through parenting and other creative means at home. This would imply that parents' perceptions impact the academic success of students at the middle school level.

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Research Question Number 3.

Timekeeper, Communicator, Promoter

Do teachers' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent? Analysis of teacher training programs by educational researchers found that teacher candidates received minimal training in parental involvement concepts and strategies (Hiatt-Michael 2001).

Sample-specific findings. Eighty percent of teachers signified parents working conditions (i.e., long hours), allowing children to raise themselves, resulting in children's new found freedom as a prediction of non-academic or non productive behavior. Furthermore, 100% of teachers indicated willingness to involve parents, whereas only 25% of parents indicated willingness on the part of teachers to involve them in school affairs. Results from the interview with teachers indicated written communication, events, and special activities as encouragement or incentives for parental involvement encouragement. Thirty five

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percent of teachers implied that lower SES parents need more encouragement than others.

Population generalized conclusion. Generally although some teachers are not thoroughly trained in parental involvement dealings, they have the best interests of their students at heart and want to encourage an active partnership among all socio-economic levels of stakeholders. Overall, the numbers did not reflect challenges families faced and the obstacle families have to overcome, yet most teachers and most parents are dedicated to the end. This would imply that teachers' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent.

Research Question Number 4 .

Director, Character Builder, Connector

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Do principals' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level depend on the socio-economic factors of the parent? Schools that are most successful with involving parents prepare and reconsider all of their established methods of doing business and restructure in ways that home, community and schools are fundamentally balanced (Rudolph, 2000).

Sample specific findings. In describing their schools and their efforts to nurture parental involvement, principals indicated 100% to communicating expectations to parents whereas, 30% and 65 % of teachers and parents respectively signified clearer communication expectations from principals. The implications that were drawn from the interviews with the two principals were possibly the most striking of all. The findings revealed significant "disconnection" between the three groups of educational stakeholders and implied that community and school was not fundamentally balanced. One hundred percent of principals indicated total understanding of the student population whereas only 15% of parents responded that their cultural heritage was unders-

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tood by the schools. The finding revealed impediments exist not necessarily because of money, but rather in parents' lack of understanding of how they could contribute.

Population generalized conclusion. While this study identified major miscommunication between stakeholders regarding parental involvement, there were complex factors to consider for example, teachers attitude in teaching, parents attitude in responding to schools, and the overall school climate. This would imply that socioeconomic factors influence principals' perceptions of parental involvement at the middle school level .

The lack of communication was prevalent on all levels. Parents saw the need for more forthcoming and initiated communication by teachers. Whereas, teachers believed parents were not communicating with them directly. Principals, on the other hand, adamantly argued that they have communicated expecta-

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tions to both parents and teachers. The disconnection of communication is the overall theme and pattern of this study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this study, the following recommendations for practical use are offered: In speaking to principals, teachers and parents, it was clear that schools are looking to strengthen parental involvement programs. Due to the various definitions for parental involvement, it would benefit schools tremendously to zone in on specific types of parental involvement, create a pilot program, and conduct a longitudinal study specifically on the middle grade level.

Middle school years and the transitioning period for students are cited as being difficult for students. Middle school students were not a focus of this study; their perceptions might have proven insightful and pivotal in providing a clearer picture of the complete partnership. It might prove beneficial for further research to be conducted on the perceptions of middle school students and transitioning at middle public school.

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A related topic raised by parents during this study was that of parents organizing a forum, operated mainly by parents, with input from teachers and administrators to garner more parental involvement or parent group within the public middle schools. If such a study were to determine that the level of parent involvement might affect change, it might have major implications for school practice.

IMPLICATIONS

In an effort to better understand issues of parental involvement and the perceptions of educational stakeholders, this study identified some complicated and varied reasons. To promote practical parental involvement programs, educators and school systems need to continually gather, analyze, and evaluate data for program effectiveness. In doing so, solicit narratives from said stakeholders.

The benefit of conducting this type of research study was to provide a better understanding into the varied perceptions that

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hinders student academic success. It was easy to assume perceptions, but until a research of this magnitude is conducted, there are always missing pieces and efforts are not usually addressing the critical issues. Understanding a problem in an effort to change it is a continual process. Therefore, research and evaluation should be embraced with focus.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A- PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT SURVEY FOR PRINCIPALS

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. I am conducting a study regarding parent involvement on the middle school level. The surveys are confidential so please do not place your name on the paper. This is a voluntary survey. **Note**, circle one **Yes** or **No** to indicate your answer.

1. How long have you been the principal at this school? _____
2. Does your school send out a news letter? **Yes No**
If so, how often is it sent to parents? _____
Parents serve on principal advisory Committee, Parent Teacher Organizations to provide input for school decisions? **Yes No**
If yes, how often do you hold meetings? _____
4. Do you make yourself available to parents? **Yes No**
5. Do volunteers assist at school in any capacity, i.e., school office, classroom, library, etc.? **Yes No**
If yes, in what capacity? _____
6. Do you send out surveys or questionnaires to parents to gather feedback regarding the school? **Yes No**
7. Do Parents assist at school functions, i.e., school dances, field trips, or other school events? **Yes No**
If yes, what functions? _____
8. Do you communicate your expectations to teachers regarding parent involvement? **Yes No**
If yes, how _____
Are teachers willing to involve parents at the school? **Yes No**
10. Are there opportunities for parents to be educated regarding the school's curriculum, their child's development, and the basic functioning of the school? **Yes No**
If yes, when _____
11. Is there time for teachers to meet with parents? **Yes No**
12. Do you encourage teachers to communicate with parents (telephone, notes, etc.)? **YesNo**
If so how _____
13. Do you make budgetary provisions regarding parental involvement? **Yes No**
yes, what provisions? _____
14. Are orientation sessions held for parents at least once per year? **Yes No**
15. Do parents have a good feeling about visiting the school? **Yes No**
16. Do you recognize parents for their involvement efforts? **Yes No**
If yes, name two ways? _____
17. Are you receptive to suggestions from parents regarding the school? **Yes No**
18. Do you believe socioeconomic background of parents influence parent involvement?
If so, how? _____
19. Do the school's activity schedules get sent home to parents? **Yes No**

APPENDIX B -PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT SURVEY FOR PARENTS

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. I am conducting a study regarding parental involvement on the middle school level. The surveys are confidential so please do not place your name on the paper. This is a voluntary survey. **Note**, circle **Yes** or **No** to indicate your answer.

1. How long have you had a child attending this school?
_____.
2. Does the school send out a newsletter?
Yes **No**
If so, how often is it sent to parents? _____
3. Do parents serve on principal advisory Committee, Parent Teacher Organizations to provide input for school decisions? **Yes** **No**
If yes, how often? _____
4. Does the principal make him/her available to you?
Yes **No**
5. Do volunteers assist at school in any capacity, i.e., school office, classroom, library, etc.?
Yes **No**
If yes, in what capacity? _____.
6. Do you work with your child at home or at school on homework, school project etc.?
Yes **No**
7. Does the school send out surveys or questionnaires to parents to gather feedback regarding the school?
Yes **No**
8. Do Parents assist at school functions, i.e., school dances, field trips, or other school events?
Yes **No**
If yes, what functions? _____
9. Do the principal communicate his/her expectations to parents regarding parent involvement?
Yes **No**
If yes, how _____
10. Are teachers willing to involve parents at the school?
Yes **No**
11. Are there opportunities for parents to be educated regarding the school's curriculum, their child's development, and the basic functioning of the school?
Yes **No**
If yes, how? _____
12. Is there time for teachers to meet with parents? **Yes** **No**

If yes,
when _____
13. Does your school make budgetary provisions regarding parent involvement?
Yes **No** If yes, what provisions?

14. Are orientation sessions held for parents at least once per year?

Yes **No**
15. Do you have a good feeling about visiting the school?
Yes **No**
16. Does the school understand your cultural background?
Yes **No**
17. Is the school receptive to suggestions from parents regarding the school?
Yes **No**
18. What is your ethnicity? (Please circle one)
African American **Caucasian** **Hispanic** **Other**
19. Do the school's activity schedules get sent home to parents? **Yes**
No
20. What is your income range (please circle one)
\$18,000-\$25,000 **\$25,000-\$35,000** **\$35,000-\$55,000** **\$55,000+**

APPENDIX C -PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT SURVEY FOR TEACHERS

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. I am conducting a study regarding parent involvement on the middle school level. The surveys are confidential so please do not place your name on the paper. This is a voluntary survey. **Note**, circle **Yes** or **No** to indicate your answer.

1. How long have you been the teacher at this school?
_____.
2. Does your school send out a newsletter? **Yes** **No**
If so, how often is it sent to parents? _____.
3. Do parents serve on principal advisory Committee, Parent Teacher Organizations to provide input for school decisions? **Yes** **No**
If yes, how often do you hold meetings? _____.
4. Do you make yourself available to parents? **Yes** **No**
5. Do volunteers assist at school in any capacity, i.e., school office, classroom, library, etc.? **Yes** **No**
If yes, in what capacity? _____.
6. Does the school send out surveys or questionnaires to parents to gather feedback regarding the school? **Yes** **No**
7. Do Parents assist at school functions, i.e., school dances, field trips, or other school events? **Yes** **No**
If yes, what functions? _____.
8. Does the principal communicate his/her expectations to teachers regarding parent involvement? **Yes** **No**
If yes, how _____.
9. Do you wish to involve parents at the school? **Yes** **No**
10. Are there opportunities for parents to be educated regarding the school's curriculum, their child's development, and the basic functioning of the school?
Yes **No**
If yes, how? _____.
11. Is there time for teachers to meet with parents? **Yes** **No**
If yes, when _____.
12. Does the principal encourage you to communicate with parents (telephone, notes, etc.)? **Yes** **No**
If so, how _____.
13. Does your school make budgetary provisions regarding parent involvement?
Yes **No**
If yes, what provisions? _____.
14. Are orientation sessions held for parents at least once per year?
Yes **No**
15. Do parents have a good feeling about visiting the school?
Yes **No**
16. Does your school recognize parents for their involvement efforts?
Yes **No**
If yes, name two ways? _____.
17. Is your principal receptive to suggestions from parents regarding the school?
Yes **No**

18. Do you believe socioeconomic background of parents influence parent in
volvement? **Yes No**
If so, how? _____
19. Do the school's activity schedules get sent home to parents?
Yes No

APPENDIX D:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PARENT AND TEACHER RESPONDENT

- (1) How do you believe parents are involved in their children's education?
- (2) What types of things do family members do at home to support their children's learning?
- (3) Are there limits to what parents should do at home to help their children?
- (4) What types of things do parents do at school to support their children's education?
- (5) To what extent do parents learn about the curriculum taught in their children's classes?
- (6) To what extent do families have a say in determining school policies and programs?
- (7) How do you believe that parents and school should work together to support children's education?
- (8) To what extent is parent and to what extent is the school responsible for the children's learning?
- (9) Please describe the parent responsibilities and the school's responsibilities for children's learning?
- (10) How should parents and schools work together in designing and developing partnership activities? As equal partners? School as leaders? Parents as leaders?
- (11) Your middle school was selected for this study because it offers a number of successful parent involvement programs. Why do you think your school may be more successful than others in involving parents?
- (12) How do teachers and administrators encourage parents to become involved?
- (13) Why are some teachers more successful than others in involving parents?
- (14) How would you describe the parents who are more involved with the school?
- (15) To what extent does the school provide services and make special arrangements to make it easier for families to be involved in the school?
- (16) How would you describe the parents who are less involved with the school?
- (17) What could teachers and principals do that they currently aren't doing to help parents become involved?
- (18) How do middle school students feel about their parents being involved at school?
- (19) What are the most important issue in dealing with families and school?
- (20) What practices/activities do you think should be sustained?
- (21) Are there any important issues about parents' involvement and schools that I haven't address?

APPENDIX E:
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS GUIDE

1. How valuable is the middle school education to parents?
1. How do you define parent involvement in the middle school?
2. What is the parent role in the middle school?
3. How important do you think parents are to the education of their children and to their academic achievement?
4. How important are parents to their children's overall behavior and to their interest in school?
5. How important is parent involvement in the middle school to the school home relations?
6. How would you describe parent involvement in your school?
7. How important understanding the culture of the family is to you?
8. How important learning about the family socio-economic status is to you?
9. How would you communicate with a non-English speaking parent?
10. What are the means of communication that the school uses to communicate with parents?
11. Is there a difference in the degree of parent involvement between racial groups?
12. Is there a difference between low socio-economic status and high socio-economic status parent in the degree of parent involvement?
13. What are the basic duties of school toward students?
14. What are the basic duties of school toward parents?
15. What is the principal duty toward parent?
16. How important are parents in decision making in the middle school?
17. What are the major factors that according to you facilitate or inhibit parent involvement in the school?